

**Testimony of Rena Bitter**  
**Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Lao Democratic People's Republic**  
**Senate Foreign Relations Committee**  
**Wednesday, July 13, 2016**

Chairman Gardner, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you as President Obama's nominee to be the U.S. Ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. I am deeply honored to be here with you today, and grateful to the President and to Secretary Kerry for the confidence they have placed in me. I am joined by several family members and colleagues, and I have been blessed with their support throughout my career.

Today, the U.S. - Lao relationship is at its most dynamic in forty years. Secretary Kerry has visited Laos once already this year - only the second visit by a Secretary of State since 1955 - and he will return this month for the ASEAN Regional Forum and other key regional meetings, followed in September by President Obama's historic trip for the East Asia Summit, U.S.-ASEAN Summit, and a bilateral visit. President Obama's visit will mark the first ever by a sitting U.S. President and it promises to open new avenues of cooperation and communication in our bilateral relationship. If confirmed, I would look forward to pursuing these opportunities.

I have been privileged to serve my country for 22 years as a Foreign Service Officer across Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia and in Washington. Most recently I served as Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. During my three years there, I saw how much progress two very different nations can make when working together on areas of common interest. If confirmed, I would seek to work with the Lao government and people to find more areas in which our goals align, so we can build a broad-based relationship that addresses the challenges of the 21st century.

For our path toward a 21st century relationship to remain on firm footing, however, we must continue our work to put the problems of the 20th century behind us. For more than 30 years, humanitarian cooperation – particularly the work to ensure the fullest possible accounting for our missing – and legacy of war assistance, such as the removal of unexploded ordnance, have been at the center of the bilateral relationship. On the unexploded ordnance assistance, thanks to your support and the support of your colleagues in Congress, we have invested almost \$100 million in Conventional Weapons Destruction Programs since 1993, with \$19.5 million allocated for FY16. This assistance has led to a reduction in casualties from more than 300 per year, to fewer than 50 during the last three years. As Secretary Kerry said when he visited Laos in January, “we can't heal the wounds, but we can and must do more so that others do not suffer the same fate.” If confirmed, I want to work with you and our partners in Laos to bring the number of casualties down to zero so we can close the door on this history for both of our countries.

At the same time, we must find ways to invest in the future. Laos' progress and ability to be a strong partner for the United States and a confident member of ASEAN will depend on improving the well-being and economic status of its people. Nutrition-related health problems remain prevalent in Laos, with stunting impacting more than 60 percent of children in some areas. In an effort to tackle comprehensively this serious developmental impediment, last October Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes while visiting Laos signed a Statement of Intent with the Ministry of Health and the Oregon Health and Science University to establish a new Lao-American Nutrition Institute (LANI). LANI will complement the Lao government's nutrition efforts by helping to develop local solutions for this health priority. Further, the USDA McGovern-Dole School Feeding Program will fund \$27 million over three years for World Food Program meal projects in schools across Laos, a program that has already dramatically increased school attendance. Finally, USAID recently awarded \$5.58 million over three years to Save the Children to improve the nutritional status of women and children in targeted areas. If confirmed, I look forward to seeing these initiatives deliver a healthier, fuller future to the children of Laos.

Lao economic development has also been a priority for the U.S. Department of State and, if confirmed, will be a priority for me as well. With a consistent 7 to 8 percent GDP growth rate over the past decade, Laos has one of the fastest growing economies in East Asia. To continue and expand the benefits of this growth, it will be key for Laos individually and within the context of ASEAN to support education and facilitate the adoption of a rules-based, high-standard regional economic and trade architecture. I hope to continue to cultivate relationships between our two private sectors and to carry on the work that the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane has undertaken to increase trade.

If confirmed, I would also seek to prioritize our people-to-people ties. Laos has the third highest per capita membership in our Young Southeast Asian Leaders' Initiative, suggesting that the young people of Laos - its future decision makers - are interested in learning more about the American people and American values. With 70 percent of the Lao population under 30, these youth outreach programs are truly building a bridge to the future leaders of Laos.

In spite of these partnerships, we continue to have concerns about Laos' human rights record and restrictions on civil society. Currently, Laos places onerous registration requirements on civil society organizations, leading to the delay or cancellation of many worthwhile projects. Civil society leaders have also been subject to efforts to silence or sideline their voices. In December 2012, Sombath Somphone was abducted at a police checkpoint and subsequently disappeared; the Lao government has yet to complete a full investigation. If confirmed, I would push for transparency in such investigations and encourage authorities to embrace the vital role that civil society plays in the development of a thriving, prosperous country. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right and, if confirmed, I will work with the government to ensure the freedom of the Lao people to worship according to their beliefs.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. I'm happy to answer your questions and, if confirmed, I look forward to working with you to advance U.S. interests in Laos and welcoming you to our Embassy in Vientiane.